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Judge throws party, hands down life sentence

DALLAS, Texas (AP) -- A judge threw a party complete with balloons, streamers and a cake to welcome a former fugitive back to her court -- and sentence him to life in prison.

"You just made my day when I heard you had finally come home," Criminal Courts Judge Faith Johnson told Billy Wayne Williams, who had been convicted in absentia of aggravated assault after he disappeared a year ago. "We're so excited to see you, we're throwing a party for you."

Williams, 53, who has a criminal record dating to the 1980s, was accused of choking his girlfriend until she passed out. He failed to appear for his trial last November and was captured Thursday at a gas station in suburban Arlington.

Before he was brought into the courtroom on Monday, the judge directed staff members as they placed balloons and streamers around the courtroom. A colorful cake was decorated with his name and one candle to signify the year he spent on the lam.

"It seems like everyone wants to have a party, and it's fun for you people, but not for me," Williams told reporters as he was led away in handcuffs.

Seana Willing, executive director of the Texas Commission on Judicial Conduct, said she found the incident troubling. "It's the kind of thing I look at and scratch my head and wonder, 'What was she thinking?'" Willing said.

She questioned whether the party violated standards of decorum and impartiality.

"The whole purpose of it was to mock him, to make him feel bad. I guess she could have put him in the stockade, in the pillory, in front of the town square and let people mock him," Willing said.

Willing said the commission will investigate if a complaint is filed, or can decide on its own to look into the matter. Judges found guilty of misconduct face a range of discipline, from private admonition to removal from the bench.

She said Johnson had never been disciplined by the regulatory agency.

Calls to the judge's office were not immediately returned Tuesday.

Trent Touchstone, a supervisory deputy U.S. marshal, said Johnson took a special interest in Williams' case after he jumped bail that she had set following the 2002 assault.

"Put yourself in her position," Touchstone said. "She's going through a trial with a jury, with defense attorneys, with prosecutors and rolling along and one day the defendant decides not to show up, and everything comes to a screeching halt."

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